

HISTORY HEADLINE: AKSAI CHIN, FROM NEHRU TO SHAH

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Indian Constitution - Features & Significant Provisions related to The Preamble, Union & its Territories and The Citizenship

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37,244 square kilometres of land. That's almost Bhutan, almost Kerala, almost Manipur and Nagaland put together. That's Aksai Chin, the north-eastern end of India's crown under Chinese occupation for many decades now, the first move made much before the Sino-Indian war of 1962. It's a cold desert of salt flatlands called the Soda Plains, watered by the Karakash, the Black Jade river. China claims much of it lies in Hotan County of Xinjiang. The China National Highway 219, running over 2,000 km, connects Yecheng in Xinjiang to Lhatse in Tibet via Aksai Chin. An asphalt road since 2013, it was a gravel track when it was completed in 1957.

Adjoining Aksai Chin is Shaksgam Valley, the strategic trans-Karakoram tract close to the Siachen glacier. In 1963, some 5,100 sq km of the valley was ceded to China by Pakistan under a boundary agreement.

So, on August 5, when Union Home Minister Amit Shah announced in Rajya Sabha that the state of Jammu and Kashmir was being bifurcated into the Union Territories of J&K and Ladakh, it made Beijing sit up. Because Ladakh, on Indian maps, includes Aksai Chin.

And the Chinese were bristling when the very next day Shah told Lok Sabha that Aksai Chin has always been Indian territory.

"I wish to place on record that whenever I mention Jammu and Kashmir in the House, it means both Pak-occupied Kashmir and Aksai Chin... And the borders of Jammu and Kashmir, as decided by our Constitution and the Constitution of Jammu and Kashmir, include both Pak-occupied Kashmir and Aksai Chin."

Sixty years ago, from the very spot Shah reiterated the Indian position on Aksai Chin, prime minister [Jawaharlal Nehru](#) had informed the nation, belatedly, about what the Chinese had been up to in Aksai Chin, "where not even a blade of grass grows".

Making a statement in Lok Sabha on August 28, 1959 (Jawaharlal Nehru: Selected Speeches, Volume 4, by Publications Division), Nehru said: "There is a large area in eastern and north-eastern Ladakh which is practically uninhabited. It is mountainous, and even the valleys are at an altitude generally exceeding 13,000 feet. To some extent, shepherds use it during the summer months for grazing... The Government of India have some police check-posts in this area but, because of the difficulties of terrain, most of these posts are at some distance from the International Border."

"Some reports reached us between October 1957 and February 1958 that a Chinese detachment had crossed the international frontier and visited Khurnak Fort, which is within Indian territory. The attention of the Chinese Government was drawn to this, and they were asked to desist from entering our territory... there is no physical demarcation of the frontier in these mountainous passes, although our maps are quite clear on the subject. Thereafter, at the end of July 1959... a small Indian reconnaissance police party was sent to this area. When this

party... was proceeding towards Khurnak Fort, it was apprehended, some miles from the border inside our territory, by a stronger Chinese detachment. This happened on July 28.”

“...the Chinese claimed that that part of the territory was theirs, but added that they would release the persons who had been apprehended. We sent a further Note to them expressing surprise at this claim and giving them the exact delineation of the traditional international frontier in this sector... No reply has yet been received to this Note. Our party was released on August 18.”

Three days later, Nehru confirmed the worst Indian fears — the Chinese had built a road via Aksai Chin. “According to an announcement made in China, the Yehcheng-Gartok Road, which is also called the Sinkiang-Tibet Highway, was completed in September 1957... Two reconnaissance parties were accordingly sent last year. One of these parties was taken into custody by a superior Chinese detachment. The other returned and gave us some rough indication of this newly constructed road in the Aksai Chin area,” he informed Rajya Sabha.

At the heart of these contesting claims were boundary lines drawn by British surveyors and officers during the 19th century. These lines changed as Britain and Russia, fearful of each other’s ambitions and expansionist designs, played the Great Game while the hold of the Qing imperials weakened.

In 1865, the line proposed by surveyor William Johnson placed Aksai Chin firmly in Kashmir. The Johnson line stretched as far as the Kunlun mountains. Following explorer-officer Francis Younghusband’s visits to the region, John Ardagh, a military engineer and intelligence officer, drew a boundary line which was not very different from the one proposed by Johnson — so, it became the Johnson-Ardagh line.

In 1899, the British proposed a new boundary in Aksai Chin. The Macartney-MacDonald line, named after the consul in Kashgar and the envoy to the imperial court in Peking, placed much of Aksai Chin, essentially the areas north of the Lakstang range, in China. The Qing administration never responded to the proposal.

India’s claim line is very similar to the Johnson line while the Chinese, at least until 1959, had pointed to the Macartney-MacDonald line.

In April 1960, Premier Chou en-Lai came to Delhi for extensive talks over a week. Aksai Chin, he told Nehru, had been Sinkianese for centuries and then Chinese: “We do not impose maps on India and we would like India to do likewise. If we must reach a settlement, then both our maps will have to be changed accordingly. Broadly speaking, may be after settlement, the Chinese map will be changed more; but this will be done when China settles the boundary question.”

Two years later, the Chinese pushed the line in Aksai Chin to what is now the Line of Actual Control. Even here, perceptions differ.

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